

Building Healthy Communities: Fifty Years of the Community Mental Health Act **By Kathleen Piché, L.C.S. W., Public Affairs Director**



On Friday, October 25, 2013, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH), LA County Board Chair/Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas (District 2), Kedren Community Mental Health and the LA County Arts Commission commemorated the 50th Anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's Community Mental Health Act. Over 200 dignitaries, mental health staff and clients gathered at Kedren to view a video artwork and giant sand tray created by artist Kim Abeles for the event. The artist worked with Kedren clients to weave together movies of children's hands as they played in sand trays and photos of nature and historical politics to produce the stunning video art wall.



In 1963, President John F. Kennedy signed the historic Community Mental Health Act into law. This legislation, and the words he used to describe it, provided the foundation for contemporary mental health policy. Local agencies such as Didi Hirsch, Gateways, Central City (Kedren), Pacific Clinics, San Fernando Valley Mental Health Centers, Inc. and Hillview all received federal dollars as a result of the Community Mental Health Act.



John H. Griffith, Ph.D., President/CEO, Kedren Community Mental Health Center kicked off the morning with an introduction and welcome. Then Dr. Griffith introduced Supervisor/Chairman Mark Ridley-Thomas, who spoke on the importance of JFK's legislation, including the war on poverty and on building community. Marvin Southard, D.S.W., Director, LACDMH, followed, speaking on the impact of JFK's death and realizing at that moment that, for him, serving the community would be the highest form of service one could do, and knowing that is what he would do with his life.

Laura Zucker, Executive Director, Los Angeles County Arts Commission spoke on the impact that art has on communities—bringing them together and creating a higher esthetic for all. Kim Abeles, Artist/Community Sand Tray and Artwork, spoke of her process, observing the photos of Kennedy actually signing the legislation and of the children's hands as they played in the sand trays. She connected the two by noting that without the first, we couldn't have had the second. Kim invited all in attendance to interact with the artwork and sand tray. All speakers underscored the power of treating each other with integrity and respect in creating a better life for the individual and the community.



Attendees got a chance to reconnect with old friends and make new acquaintances, building and reinforcing community ties among those that serve persons with behavioral health issues in Los Angeles County.



A lunch reception followed at noon and music was provided by Dawn Norfleet, flutist, vocalist, composer and arranger.